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ABSTRACT

Radical composition teachers see a need for democratic learning methods such as classroom dialogue and collaborative research, but ultimately the constraints of classroom life prevent the use of such methods. As a result, many leftist teachers end up practicing strategies that seem to be taken from traditional rhetorics. Donald Lazere, one leftist professor, invites other writing instructors to join him in a back to basics movement which is unavoidable if students are to become truly empowered. Other leftist professors espouse completely opposite views, resulting in confusion and a loss of respect for the profession. To determine whether there is a discernible connection between theory and practice, classroom activities of three professors who all hold strong theoretical beliefs were examined and compared. The three teachers espoused respectively theories of writing based on the social-epistemic approach, the expressionistic approach, and traditional approaches. Frequently, teachers' classroom practices are at odds with their views as theorists. This tension between theory and practice is sometimes openly acknowledged by scholars in the field, and further work should be carried out in this area. Until the methods and strategies actually used by teachers with different perspectives are detailed extensively, all that can be stated precisely are the myriad assumptions about teaching practice, based on the theoretical labels used to describe them. (HB)

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Labels We Use to Describe Ourselves: What Do They Mean in Terms of Classroom Practice?

(A Paper Presented at the Annual CCCC Convention, Cincinnati, Ohio--March 19, 1992)

Donald Lazere, a self-described leftist English professor, recently wrote an important essay that appeared in College English. It's an important essay for one basic reason: It clearly details the web of ironies and contradictions that the proponents of liberatory, radical pedagogy often seem to be caught in as they design their composition courses. One of these ironies might be summed up in this way: Radical teachers see a need for democratic learning methods--they would like to use classroom dialogue, collaborative research, and a critical stance toward the political status quo as they teach their writing students, but ultimately they find that the constraints of classroom life prevent the use of such methods. As a result, many of the teachers who say that they believe in the critical approach of people like Paulo Freire and Ira Shor end up practicing classroom strategies that seem to be taken directly from the pages of traditional rhetorics and handbooks.

After detailing how he has grappled with this sort of problem, Lazere confesses that he is one of those radical teachers who has decided to use traditional methods. But he does not apologize for what many of his colleagues would view as

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contradictory behavior. Instead, he ends his essay by asking other radical teachers to join him in a new back to basics movement by drilling all students in standard English and academic culture. Such drilling, he asserts, may be a form of coercion, but it is "unavoidable" if students are to become truly empowered.

Although Lazere makes no apologies for his views, he is acutely aware that many of his politically progressive colleagues could not disagree with him more. These teachers may grudgingly concede that students might need to be shown how to phrase something in edited American English, yet they would also maintain that truly liberatory teaching has but one major task: to help students transcend the mind-numbing, culturally imposed consciousness that can prevent them from critically analyzing just why it is that poverty and unequal power relations are tolerated in affluent Western democracies. So on the one hand we have liberatory teachers like Lazere perhaps quizzing students on the niceties of comma usage, while on the other, we have the same kind of teachers ignoring comma splices in an effort to get their students to interview, say, exploited non-union service workers who can't afford health insurance. It's no wonder that writing specialists sometimes still have credibility problems with deans, tenure committees, and others who make critical decisions about academic careers. If two writing teachers who espouse the same goals and beliefs cannot begin to agree on what constitutes sound classroom practice, how can we expect those outside of our field

to be anything but baffled when they try to define what a composition expert should be expected to teach and publish?

In an effort to see whether there is any connection at all between the theoretical positions composition teachers hold and actual classroom practice, I decided to closely examine the classrooms of three teachers who hold very strong beliefs about what writing is, how it might be taught, and what it is actually good for. The case studies that resulted often raise more questions than they answer. For instance, after looking at what goes on in actual classrooms and comparing it to the goals the teachers in each of these classrooms say they have, I have begun to wonder whether the theoretical perspectives our field recognizes actually exist at all outside of the academic articles we write. And I have also begun to wonder why it sometimes seems that the most liberating kind of teaching may go on in classrooms run not by radicals like Lazere, but by teachers that many of us might consider quite conservative.

I started my study with a writing teacher whose theory closely resembles what James Berlin calls social-epistemic rhetoric. As all of us know, this theoretical perspective is quite similar to what Lazere and others label as radical and liberatory in orientation. This teacher (I'll call her Professor A because she asked me not to use her real name) told me that the writing class should be a place in which students learn to "analyze and critique prevailing cultural beliefs that serve to oppress the disenfranchised here in our country." When I pointed

out to her that her words closely parallelled Berlin's definition of social-epistemic rhetoric, she readily agreed. "I know Berlin's work," she said, "and my definition of who I am is close to what he says social rhetoric ought to do."

Before I visited her classroom, I asked Professor A what sorts of activities she thought appropriate for a group of freshman writers. She quickly detailed the kinds of strategies Ira Shor writes about in his book Critical Teaching and Everyday Life, a teacher cited by Berlin as a model for the social-epistemic practitioner. "I'd like my students to examine little things, TV shows, fashion, fast food, stuff like that," she said. "I want them to see that the things they cherish the most can often keep them from realizing their potential as students and citizens." She quickly added, though, that her students don't always see the point of these sorts of assignments. "They aren't too intellectually mature," she said, "and it's pretty hard to push them to work together to critically analyze a society they so much want to be a part of."

Following our conversation about theory, I spent three days in Professor A's classroom. During that time, her students were working on what she termed "descriptive" essays. Many students were indeed describing some of the things they cherished the most. One student was writing about her favorite restaurant; another was trying to describe a park where he first met his girlfriend; and another was looking at the kinds of clothes her friends typically wore. But Professor A never mentioned ways

that her students might critically analyze the culture that created these things. Instead, she spent one class session lecturing on the active verbs and precise diction that descriptive essays ought to contain. Another day was spent discussing ways to organize the essays, and the third day was devoted to a discussion of proofreading problems ("academic good manners" was how Professor A referred to proofreading).

A week later when we sat down to talk about what I observed, Professor A didn't wait long before pointing out the contradictions she saw between her theory and practice. She was quite aware that in the classroom she stressed ideas that appeared quite traditional. "With my students, I do try to be democratic," she said. "I allow them to pick their own topics within the framework of the assignment, but I don't always feel I can push them to do things they're not ready to do, especially when they need so much work on just writing an academically acceptable paper." She went on to say that her public university students were "too conservative" and "too preoccupied" with finding a possible career to work hard at critiquing the prevailing ideology. "Sometimes, I have to just admit that I can't do everything," she said, "and often that means I can't always be as political in my teaching as I'd like." Of course, I was curious if she ever felt able to run a classroom in the way her beliefs would dictate. "My very advanced students can handle an interdisciplinary approach that de-emphasizes grades," she said. "Sometimes my very best students are able to work

collaboratively to see through the lies our culture tells them. Trouble is, I don't get those kind of students very often."

While I was observing Professor A, I was also interviewing another writing teacher whose theoretical perspective was quite different from the social-epistemic approach. This teacher had been trained as a literary scholar, but became a composition teacher because of necessity. "I fell into composition by default," she said. "It was the only way I could get a job." I'll call her Professor B, for she, too, asked me to maintain her anonymity. Her perspective closely matched what Berlin calls the expressionistic approach to writing instruction. "I want my students to say what they believe and say it in a voice that is uniquely their own," she said. This desire emphasizes writing as a form of self-discovery that can lead to what Berlin maintains is the major goal of expressionistic teaching: "Authentic self-expression [that] can thus lead to authentic self-experience for both the writer and the reader." (485) Professor B stressed this notion of self quite often when discussing her theory of teaching composition. "It's an individual thing," she said. "I want my students to be who they are through their writing." Not once during our conversations did she mention the primacy of socio-cultural critique as Professor A did. Nor did she use the term "working together" or stress the importance of collaboration among students.

I was somewhat surprised, then, to find her freshman classroom a pretty lively place, full of students working

together in what she called "helping circles." During my first observation of her class, the students in their groups were working on a personal experience essay, trying to help each other brainstorm for ideas to write about. A week or so later, students were again in groups reading drafts of their essays, trying to provide each other with what Professor B termed "more appropriate language and structure" that could be integrated into polished versions of the papers. One student said that Professor B wanted them to "cut out slang and stuff like that" to "make these sound like they were written for educated readers." Who were these educated readers, I wondered. "You know, other professors, people like that," was the reply.

After my classroom visits, I talked one last time to Professor B and asked her if all of the group work helped her students find their individual voices. She said that it did, but she also acknowledged the irony of what she was doing. "Some might say that the result of group work is a paper that no longer reflects the voice of the individual student," she said, "but my students don't do well writing alone. They need each other to bring out what they want to say." Then we talked for a while about her requirement that student papers contain no slang or cliche-ridden informal usage. "I guess that's harder for me to justify," she said, "but I want them to find and develop their academic selves, not their every day selves." She did agree that student papers sound more real with the slang and nonstandard usage left in. "I do want them to find their own voices," she

added, "but, let's face it, some voices are more appropriate in the academy than others." She seemed to echo the words of Professor A when asked if she ever felt comfortable allowing students to use the language of the dorm and the neighborhood. "Sometimes it's okay," she said, "when I've got some upper level creative writing students."

The final teacher I interviewed and observed was a man in his early sixties who often taught American literature as well as two sections of writing each semester. I'll call him Professor C. He was eager to talk about his view of teaching writing, but he admitted he knew very little composition theory. "I wish I had time for that sort of thing," he said, "but I just blunder on doing what I've always done." Professor C's theoretical perspective might be termed traditional. In fact, he was quite fond of calling himself a "conservative old man." Unlike Professors A and B, he openly conceded that he had few goals beyond prodding his students into producing academically respectable papers that fit into certain rhetorical modes. "There's a purpose for every paper," he said, "and students need to see how to accomplish that purpose as well as possible." I asked him who decided on a the purposes of each assignment in his classroom. "I do," he said, "but I make my students think that they do." In a way, Professor C's views coincide fairly well with what Berlin calls cognitive rhetoric, a theory that Berlin believes is the "heir apparent of current-traditional rhetoric." (480) In fact, at one point Professor C seemed to recite

verbatim Berlin's definition of cognitive rhetoric as a theoretical framework emphasizing composing as a goal-directed process governed by a coherent structure of steps or stages. "If my students just follow the structures I give them," he said, "they can often get A's."

When I went to observe Professor C's classroom, it was near the end of the quarter, and students were working together on their final paper, a piece of persuasive writing. And I do mean they were working together. Each paper was being written collaboratively by a group of three students, with each student in each group responsible for specific elements that were to be used in this assignment. These elements roughly corresponded to Aristotle's triad of ethos, pathos, and logos. In other words, one student was supposed to find ways to make the paper sound credible for a specific audience; another student was to find emotional stories that would be useful in appealing to the needs of that audience; and the third student was to detail a chain of reasoning appropriate to the subject matter at hand. The students were to then write the paper together in class, discarding and incorporating ideas until they were satisfied that the essay was persuasive. The topics, I soon learned, were all chosen by the students themselves, and they varied widely. But most dealt with rather controversial and radical ideas: One group was arguing that commercial television for children should be abolished. Another group was arguing that clothing manufacturers should stop putting designer logos on clothing and

thus reduce its price. A third group was trying to argue that students should be permitted to sit on the university committee that considers tuition increases. Professor C made himself available if a group had questions, but he was mostly an unobtrusive presence in class while the students worked together. Instead of answering student questions directly, he would almost always turn the question around and ask students what is was they wanted to accomplish.

Professor C seemed surprised when I told him later that his teaching seemed the opposite of conservative, in some ways similar to the liberatory, social-epistemic notions espoused by Professor A. It was clear, for instance, that most of his students were struggling with arguments that tried to defy and confront prevailing cultural beliefs. It was also quite clear that Professor C's classroom was a fairly democratic one--at least his students were choosing their own topics and writing about them together without much dictatorial interference from their teacher. "But they were just following my directions," he said. "If that's radical, I've been a radical all my life without knowing it."

This statement from Professor C sums up pretty well what I began to discover during the course of my interviews and classroom observations. Quite often, teachers' classroom practices can be at odds with the view they have of themselves as theorists. This tension between theory and practice is sometimes openly acknowledged by scholars in our field. Donald Lazere

certainly acknowledged it in the College English essay I referred to earlier. And the little case studies I've done also begin to show that this tension does exist. But what I've discussed here is just a meager beginning. Although the teachers I talked with and observed seem fairly representative of the different kinds of composition teachers I know, the stories of three people cannot be considered generalizable. That's why I think it's important for more work to be done in this area. If we want to find out, for instance, how and where students are learning the analytical skills that might help them to examine the prevailing ideology of their culture, we may have to sometimes look in some unlikely places. Until we actually begin to detail in an extensive way how teachers with different perspectives actually do things in their classrooms, we will simply be making assumptions about teaching practice based on the books people order for their classes, the articles they write, and the theoretical labels they use to describe themselves.

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